Dialogue

Higher Education in the South Pacific: A Political Economy

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Unhappy in the Isles of Oceania

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Robert E. Gibson, Educator and Advocate of Justice

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Robert E. Gibson, Educator and Advocate of Justice

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Dr Robert E. Gibson, who has died at the age of ninety-four, was well-known in Hawai'i for his work as an advocate for senior citizens, his involvement in community affairs in Waimānalo, O'ahu, and his tireless political efforts for the improvement of life in these islands. At the memorial service held in Waimānalo leaders from the community, the Honolulu City Council, the state legislature, and the US Congress spoke of Gibson's dedication and commitment to social justice. The focus of remarks at the service and in the obituaries that appeared in Honolulu newspapers concerned Gibson's retirement years, if one so active can be said to have retired. This remarkable man had Pacific ties that deserve to be acknowledged and honored.

Gibson was the first civilian director of education for the US Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (Micronesia). He came to the islands with a strong belief in community-based education that would build on the needs of the Micronesian people, using language and culture to form curriculum. Gibson's previous experience as a superintendent of schools in California, as educational administrator for the War Relocation Authority, and as director of education in the South Korea Interim Government had strengthened his desire to build an education system that would relate directly to the life of the local community.

Deeply influenced by the language of the United Nations Charter and the principles of trusteeship, Gibson and his staff worked toward a self-sufficient, self-governing Micronesia. Micronesian staff working in education in those early years of the trusteeship included many who later rose to prominence, among them David Ramarui, Alfonso Oiterong, Dwight Heine, Bailey Olter, and John Mangefel. Teacher training was the central focus of Gibson's program. Although elementary and intermediate schools had been established after the war, most teachers had only the barest minimum of training and often relied on rote learning methods of

the Japanese mandate era. Gibson and his staff saw the urgent need for teachers who could work to devise their own curriculum, teach in the vernacular language, and creatively involve students in the life of the community. Pacific Islands Central School, initially on Chuuk and later moved to Pohnpei, was for many years Micronesia's only secondary institution and worked to produce teachers. At the same time large-scale efforts were devoted to in-service teacher training and summer institutes.

Gibson's emphasis on island-related education centered on the use of the vernacular languages in the classroom and in creating a curriculum appropriate to the island setting. He vehemently resisted every suggestion to impose an American-style curriculum in the Trust Territory's schools. His philosophy brought him into direct conflict with many administrators over the years, and his efforts were hampered by meager funding. As both a financial necessity and a matter of principle, teachers were to be paid by the community in which they worked. In reality copra taxes and other revenues did not always generate sufficient funds to support teachers. The use of Micronesian languages and an island-appropriate curriculum often met with opposition in the community, where some parents sought to have their children learn English and obtain an "American-style" education as guarantees of success in the latest colonial world.

The matter came to a head with the inauguration of the Kennedy administration in 1961. The New Frontier in Micronesia brought what Gibson called the "hurry-up boys," who wanted quick action and were prepared to offer large budgets. Education was seen as the keystone of the program to modernize Micronesia, but in the eyes of the new leaders this meant importing expatriate teachers, using an American curriculum, and English-language teaching from grade one. Large amounts of money poured into the Trust Territory to build schools and housing and to hire American staff. Gibson fought valiantly to retain his programs, but it was a losing battle. At one point an official from the Department of Interior angrily admonished Gibson, saying that the job was to make Americans out of "these people" as fast as possible. Gibson replied emphatically, "No, that's not my job. . . . I'm not going to make Americans out of them. My job is to make them better Micronesians and better world citizens." After many such arguments, Gibson realized that his efforts to continue island-related education had been defeated and in 1964 he retired and left Micronesia for his home in Waimānalo and a life of community service.

In the 1970s developments in the United States brought bilingual and bicultural education back to Micronesian schools. Much of the emphasis on island-centered studies and use of vernacular languages echoed the work that Gibson and his colleagues had done twenty years earlier. This irony was not lost on those Micronesians and Americans who had seen the process unfold. Although the emphasis on self-sufficiency has never regained the position it held during the Gibson years, the programs begun in the seventies saw fruition as a growing number of Islanders became involved in the study of Micronesian languages and cultures. Education in the countries of Micronesia today faces problems related to social and economic change, and as island leaders struggle with the issues of curriculum they might well examine an earlier education system that aimed at their independence. Gibson's firm belief in the rights of island people to learn their own languages and study their unique history and culture survived the battles with bureaucrats. We would do well to emulate the spirit of dedication and the commitment to justice that informed every aspect of his life.

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ROBERT E. GIBSON, *PhD, born 16 January 1898; died 7 November 1992.*